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Pedagogic assistant: a new job to help students in handicap situation

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between students with visual disabilities and their peers and between students with visual disabilities and their teachers during training assisted by educative informatics. Information and Communication Technologies will sometimes necessitate the cooperation of the teachers or the peers. Interviews of ten students with visual disabilities highlight the importance of this cooperation. Even if the development of adapted educative informatics technologies and handicap legislative framework have progressed these last ten years, difficulties of students in handicap situation are often unknown. Because each student with visual disabilities best knows his needs, he should have a central position to define the adaptations required to help him.

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1. Introduction

At the end of the 80s, considerations about the individualization of educational action for pupils in handicapped situation promoted individual assistance. It aims at compensating the disadvantage to give everyone a fair chance. After the law of the 11th of February 2005 “Égalité des chances”¹, French Universities signed a charter University/Disability which relies on article 20 of the law:

“Institutions of higher education register handicapped students or students presenting other health disabilities, within the framework provisions to regulate their access as well as other students, and provide their training by implementing necessary improvements to their situation in the organization, the conduct and the assistance of their studies.”²

The article specifies that: "educational assistants can be hired by the Government" in order to support integration of students with handicapped situation. From Pre-School to College, these assistants are designed as “school care assistant” whereas in the Universities they are “tutor”, “pedagogic assistant” or “studies assistant”. I choose to keep “pedagogic assistant” here.

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¹ Equal chances (free traduction)

² Free traduction

Pedagogic assistants can meet diverse difficulties. On one hand, they often have no specialized knowledge about disabilities. On the other hand they have to adapt to each learner. For example, a learner whose vision deteriorates may not be able to use his/her screen magnification software and may need to change to the only use of reading software. So, the pedagogic assistant may have to think about how to describe plans and schemas.

The people hired have generally no professional skills and receive no specific training. Thus the pedagogic assistant cannot know the borderline between help and excessive interventionism. This can lead to a dependence relationship that legitimates the assistant, consciously or not. The learner can also settle a relation of dependence towards his assistant establishing a close relationship. Puig (2005) advises that the assistant should promote self-abnegation. Note that training costs would be assumed by the Government and/or universities. In this context, we would like to forget the problem of the cost but it is inevitable. Up to final year of high school, contracts are helped by the government and in universities a budget is reserved for the assistant salaries.

In this study, we propose to present the new job of pedagogic assistant in French university and the difficulties that can be met.

2. Methodology

First note that according to Puig (2005), support has three functions: “an emotional function of reciprocity and reinsurance; a function of social mediation intended to facilitate the communication with the circle of acquaintances of the handicapped person; a function of technical support.” (Puig, 2005, p.62)³. The author adds that in each of these situations, there is “inevitably reciprocity, mediation and assistance. Only their proportions vary.”⁴ (2005, p. 66). I postulate that these proportions can be explained by numerous factors (typology of the disability and relative needs, pedagogic assistant personality, student personality...).

Second, I propose that the job of pedagogic assistants should be analyzed following adaptation theories. «Every response, whether it be an act directed towards the outside world or an act internalized as thought, takes the form of an adaptation or, better, as a re-adaptation » (Piaget 1967, p.12). A new situation inevitably requires that the individual rebalances between his organism and the new environment. The pedagogic assistant who meets a new disability will have to set up adaptation strategies to face it.

To constitute a qualitative corpus for analysis, we interviewed and recorded persons in charge of the handicap offices who recruited pedagogic assistant in the 3 Montpellier Universities. Then, I interviewed 8 students with visual disabilities⁵ and two pedagogic assistants⁶. Almost for two years, we worked as pedagogic assistant close to a blind student. This position involved to be *in situ* during the activities, is time consuming and limited the number of students followed. Moreover, Arborio and Fournier stated that “we can only directly observe a limited situation, a significant unity of place and acts in the light of the research objectives, easily accessible to an outside view and authorizing a prolonged presence”⁷ (1999, p. 23). Also, the participant observation was overt: I informed the student about the reason of my presence. After paper transcription of oral information, I employed ethnographic content analysis (ECA), which proposes an analysis methodology adapted to qualitative data. Qualitative data analysis involves themes identification, advancing hypotheses from data and clarification of the link between data and appropriate themes (Tesch, 1990).

The analysis brings forward some difficulties met by the students. We illustrate them with some extracts of interviews.

³ Free traduction

⁴ Free traduction

⁵ This study is being done in the frame of our thesis research about “TICE and learning of students with visual disabilities”.

⁶ There are few students with visual disabilities in the Montpellier student community and only three of them benefit from a human
It was not possible to interview all three.

⁷ Free traduction

3. Analysis

These new jobs, which are not yet professionalized, led to several questions: what are the profiles of the pedagogic assistants? How to face the handicap without specific training? The interviews allow us to bring some answers, which we illustrate by extracts from transcription.

3.1. Pedagogic assistant profiles

Interviews with the persons in charge of the handicap offices allowed us to characterize different pedagogic assistant profiles. The majority of assistant contracts are for students, but not only. For example, in the case of very heavy handicap, it is difficult to hire a student. So the University of Montpellier 1 chose to work with associations like *gihp*⁸, *arieda*⁹ or *uahv*¹⁰ while the universities of Montpellier 2 and Montpellier 3 recruited people outside of the university. Below, the chief office of the University of Montpellier 2 presents the different contracts in place:

VAR (*in charge of the University Montpellier 2 office*)

1. nous on a des contrats on a deux types de contrat chez
2. nous on a des contrats, des contractuels donc qui sont des
3. qui ne sont pas étudiants qui sont des personnes
4. extérieures qu'on recrute en fonction des profils des
5. besoins des étudiants donc et puis sur certaines compétences
6. et capacités donc on a cette année cinq assistants
7. pédagogiques donc ils ont tous des profils différents ça ça
8. dépend après des besoins et de ce qu'on recherche CLA à la
9. base est assistante sociale qui a travaillé dans la fonction
10. publique hospitalière et elle est musicothérapeute voilà
11. donc elle travaille avec nous depuis c'est la deuxième année
12. et donc elle travaille uniquement avec ET3 [...]
13. voilà on a un éducateur spécialisé une jeune qui sort d'un
14. master prévention santé voilà donc on a des profils comme ça
15. qui correspondent aussi aux besoins des étudiants qui attendent
16. un accompagnement voilà et qui ont développés des compétences
17. et des capacités en termes d'accompagnement humain voilà

Transcription n°1¹¹

As we can read, profiles are quite different. [Line 4] the speaker explains that recruitment is based on *competencies* and *capacities*. Parry (1996) defines competence as a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes. We can understand that knowledge refers to the formation of the person. Among people recruited, we find some with social formation: [lines 6&7] the social assistant and [line 9] the specialist educator. Also, some have health formation: [lines 9&10] master of health prevention. Besides, know-how (knowledge implementation) and skills (attitudes) are developed from the profession practice and from the contact with the student.

Despite their skills and abilities, it is not easy for them to adjust their assistance to the student disability. Thus this job may lead to different challenges.

⁸ Groupement pour l'Insertion des personnes Handicapées Physiques

⁹ Association Régionale pour l'Intégration et l'Education des Déficiants Auditifs en Languedoc Roussillon

¹⁰ Union des Aveugles et Handicapés de la Vue de Montpellier et de la Région

¹¹ Translation transcription n°1:

VAR (*in charge of the Montpellier 2 office*):

we have contracts we have two kinds of contracts we have contracts staff well that are not students who are outside persons that we recruit according to the student needs and then on some competencies and capacities then this year we have five pedagogic assistants they all have different profiles it depends on the needs and on what we search, initially CLA is a social assistant who worked on the public hospital and she is music therapist thus she works with us for two years and she only works with ET3 [...] we have a specialist educator a young one who finished a master about health prevention that's it so we have profiles like that, that also correspond to the student needs who wait for an assistance that's it and who developed skills and capacities in term of human assistance that's it.

3.2. Some difficulties

Pedagogic assistant tasks vary according to the student needs. They take notes, either directly on computer or by hand. Anyway, in the latter case, they should type the notes on the computer so that students with visual disability can read them with the reading software or with the screen magnification software. The assistant should also assist the student in reading paper and documents distributed or in manipulating tools. Whatever the functions assigned to him, the handicap students' situation may make the assistant wonder about it. One assistant told:

ENQ (*researcher*)

1. qu'est-ce que tu peux dire de ton expérience d'assistante

2. pédagogique ? qu'est-ce qu'il te pose le plus de souci

3. au niveau pédagogique ?

LIN (*pedagogic assistants*)

4. alors on vient d'en parler pour le cours de phonétique par

5. exemple alors c'est vrai que alors en plus c'est vrai que

6. comme ET1 a déjà suivi certains cours il y a des choses qu'il

7. sait déjà alors moi quand je lui lis certaines choses il me

8. dit non, non ça je sais rien qu'à l'oreille ça je connais donc

9. voilà ça fait perdre un peu de temps moi je sais pas s'il

10. faut que je note ou que je lui lise simplement

Transcription n°2¹²

She explains that she hesitated about how to proceed to help the blind student. With the direct form of the reported speech "he said" [lines 7-8], the assistant echoes the student response and we can note that according to his own needs the student adapts to the assistant work. As the assistant does not know the student knowledge, she has to wait until the adjustment and consequently they lose time [line 6]. She emphasizes "I don't know" [line 9], negatively.

Then in the following extract, the researcher asked the pedagogic assistant to explain explicitly the origin of the difficulties.

ENQ

1. et est-ce qu'en fait tu dirais que le problème vient plus du

2. fait de la connaissance du handicap ou particulièrement vis à

3. vis de lui ou en général ou du fait de pas être de la filière

4. et de pas connaître les cours en fait ?

LIN

5. non je pense c'est plutôt par rapport au handicap là

6. méconnaissance des réflexes que nous on a pas forcément

7. voilà tu vois des choses qui vont de soi pour nous et qui

8. pêche un peu plus pour ET1 par exemple je pense que c'est

9. plus ça n'ayant jamais fait ça enfin ce type de handicap là

10. du moins voilà c'est plus ça en fait l'adaptation à ça qu'à

11. la matière en elle-même quoi

Transcription n°4¹³

¹² Translation transcription n°2 :

ENQ (*researcher*)

what can you say about your pedagogic assistant experience? Pedagogically what is the most difficult for you?

LIN (*pedagogic assistant*)

so we just talked about it concerning the phonetic lesson for example while it's true that as ET1 know yet some lessons there are things he already knows so when I read some things he said to me no, no I know it just hearing it I know it so that's it we spend a little time I don't know if I must write or just read it to him".

¹³ Translation transcription n°3 :

LIN (*pedagogic assistant*)

yes that's it in fact and concerning the lesson's transcription also for example when I say to myself type my lessons it's true that I can see so I make paragraphs but in this case I say to myself that it is absolutely worthless so I try to do it as comprehensible as possible to the ear because after I don't know for you (he speaks to ET1)

ET1 (*student n°1*)

it's the same with AKA

ENQ (*researcher*)

The pedagogic assistant tells that he meets difficulties because he does not know the specific handicap of the learner [Line 6]. More specifically he mentioned the lack of knowledge concerning this kind of handicap reflex (he worked with mental handicap but never with people with visual disability). In her speech, we also note the otherness because “us” [line 7] is opposite to “ET1” [line 8]. It is interesting because difference is often a source of misunderstanding whereas she emphasizes that eventually the problem is adaptation [line 10]. Adaptation is “described as an equilibrium between the action of the organism on the environment and vice versa” Piaget 1967, p.8). So, every new situation requires an adaptation of the organism. In this case, the peculiarity is that adaptation has to be made according to the condition of the blind student.

4. To conclude

From this exploratory study, I highlight the need for cooperation between the student in a handicap situation and the pedagogic assistant in order to adjust the work from the former to the needs of the latter. The variety of visual disabilities but also of courses content necessitate very individualized assistance that is not easy to anticipate without training. Student contracts are not possible to professionalize for cost reasons and because of the turn-over of assistants. For the others contracts, training could be considered but then should it be for each handicap? I think that the uniqueness of each student situation and the fact that the student himself knows best his own needs should lead to a better communication with his pedagogic assistant. That is why I envisage cooperation and adaptation as the key success factors of the pedagogic assistant.

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that is to say ?

ET1 (student n°1)

she asked me by writing your lesson do I have to do paragraphs withdrawals and so on I said to her no you don't have to do it you just have to make an empty line every paragraph.